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A NATIONAL STRATEGY TO WIN THE WAR AGAINST ISLAMIST TERROR

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We are a nation at war. Fifteen years ago, Islamist terrorists attacked the United States, and today we remain engaged in a generational struggle against them. But times have changed, our enemy has evolved, and it is clear that we are no longer winning the fight. Our policies have failed to contain the danger, let alone roll it back. Now extremists are going forth to all corners of the globe—to establish safe havens, to inspire followers, and to advance a mortal threat against our people and our way of life.

This evil should not be underestimated. Islamist terrorists have perverted a major religion into a hateful worldview, and while most Muslims do not share their beliefs, their influence is spreading like wildfire. Yesterday's terrorist cells have grown into full-fledged terrorist armies that have captured territory and used the web to recruit new foot soldiers by the thousands. The threat is not from isolated groups but rather from a broader global movement, one focused on undermining open societies and subjecting millions to barbaric rule.

Unfortunately, years of failed leadership in Washington have put the United States at greater risk of attack by these radical forces. America's retreat from the world stage has created an array of power vacuums, which terrorists have exploited in order to replenish their ranks and plot against us. They are now making inroads into the heart of the Western world, and our city streets are becoming the new battleground. Terrorists are trying to send operatives to our shores and radicalize new ones in U.S. communities. Indeed, for the first time since 9/11, Americans feel like the war has returned to our doorstep.

This strategy outlines how we can reverse the tide of terror. Many brave men and women have worked hard to keep our country safe, and we owe it to them to make sure we are on the right track. This is also a guide for the next president of the United States, who must be clear-eyed about the nature of the threat and prepared to confront it decisively. Make no mistake, this war will be long, and it will test America's resolve. But to protect our country—and honor the memory of those we have lost to terrorism and fighting it—we must rededicate ourselves to ultimate victory.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael T. McCaul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael T. McCaul
Chairman

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Author's Note

This document serves as a follow-up to the national security agenda released by House Republicans in June 2016, entitled, *Achieving U.S. Security through Leadership and Liberty*, part of the “A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America” initiative. That agenda contained 67 recommendations for Congress and the President, including ideas to protect the homeland, defeat terrorists, tackle new threats, and defend freedom. This document focuses exclusively on America’s homeland security and counterterrorism policies, and it proposes a new whole-of-government strategy to fight terror—here at home and abroad. Dozens of experts on both sides of the aisle were consulted in its drafting. The ideas contained herein are not partisan; rather, they are common-sense guideposts that Congress and future presidential administrations should follow to secure our country against terrorists.

I. Introduction

OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGY

Fifteen years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States remains at war with terrorists who carry out horrific acts to further a hateful ideology. America and its allies have led an unprecedented campaign against these extremists. But despite years of conflict, terrorist groups like the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al Qaeda—as well as their affiliates and adherents—do not appear to be losing. In many ways, they are thriving. Unfortunately, we have lost touch with the core principles needed to prevail in this fight, which is why this strategy aims to outline a path to victory in the war against Islamist terror.

This counterterrorism strategy outlines how we can reverse the tide of terror.

Before 2001, the United States was not prepared to wage such a decades-long struggle. Our country's military and intelligence services were not structured to meet the threat, and American power was mainly directed at deterring aggression from nation-states. The United States treated terrorism largely as a law-enforcement concern, not a matter of war and peace. But 9/11 marked an inflection point in our history, and Americans came to view radical Islamist terrorism as an existential threat to our values and way of life.

The George W. Bush Administration dramatically expanded the government's counterterrorism resources, authorities, and capabilities. President Bush placed terrorism at the top of Washington's national security priority list and adopted a strategy that pursued America's enemies no matter where they were. By the end of his tenure, the United States was committed to two wars, but the country had not suffered another major terrorist attack.

Soon after taking office, President Barack Obama sought to turn the page on what he perceived to be a troubled chapter in American history. He ended several controversial programs, pulled U.S. forces back from overseas, and effectively declared an end to the "global war on terror." President Obama pursued a far narrower counterterrorism strategy, focusing almost exclusively on al Qaeda. While his Administration achieved some of its tactical goals, including killing terrorist leaders, it also missed—and subsequently failed to stop—the broader Islamist terror wave, including the rise of ISIS.

As a result, today we have fallen behind the threat. More than a decade after President Bush released a national counterterrorism strategy and five years after President Obama released his own, the United States is still not winning the war. We need to readjust, urgently. Our country must take a more strategic approach to the conflict and acknowledge we are fighting a global war against Islamist terror—one that is not limited to a specific group, but rather a worldwide movement driven by an insidious ideology and with an evolving mix of combatants and adherents. The enemy has the momentum, so we cannot wait to reorient U.S. policy.

This document outlines a robust strategy to halt and reverse the terror phenomenon for the sake of our nation’s security and to preserve international stability. First, the strategy examines the terror threat environment and the nature of the enemy we face. Second, it outlines broad goals, or “ends,” for U.S. counterterrorism policy and what victory will look like. Finally, it presents in detail the key Counterterrorism Priorities, or “means,” needed to reach our overarching goals, including: **(1)** thwart attacks and protect our communities; **(2)** stop recruitment and radicalization at home; **(3)** keep terrorists out of America; **(4)** take the fight to the enemy; **(5)** combat terrorist travel and cut off financial resources; **(6)** deny jihadists access to weapons of mass destruction; **(7)** block terrorists from returning to the battlefield; **(8)** prevent the emergence of new networks and safe havens; and **(9)** win the battle of ideas.

THE TERROR THREAT ENVIRONMENT

The United States and its allies face the most severe terror threat environment since 2001, and in some ways the danger now exceeds that period. We are safer against 9/11-style attacks because of significant security improvements, but our enemy has evolved. Today, extremists are crowd-sourcing their violence and franchising terror to small cells and independent followers, drawing on the power of social media and using secure, encrypted communications to conceal their plots. At the same time, extremists have benefitted from a decline in U.S. leadership on the world stage and the emergence of new power vacuums. The result is an unprecedented terror surge and the advance of more terrorist foot soldiers and safe havens than any time in modern history.

Terrorism is a tactic—politically-motivated violence designed to coerce people and their governments. But the threat today is far more specific. The danger comes primarily from *Islamist terrorists*, fanatics who have distorted a major religion into a repressive political ideology. They seek to form a totalitarian empire devoid of political, economic, and religious freedom. To reach this goal, they use terrorism as a means of waging war against those who stand in their way. They have designated their enemies as unbelievers—including Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Muslims who reject their cause—and are working to undermine alleged “apostate” governments to build a so-called global caliphate.

The Islamist terror movement is rising, not declining, and has motivated a historic level of plotting against the West. ISIS is the primary jihadist group fueling resurgent radicalism. The organization has established itself throughout the Middle East and North Africa, recruited tens of thousands of fighters from more than 120 countries to flock to its safe havens, and radicalized untold numbers of followers worldwide to embrace its extreme views. In just a two-year period, ISIS has been connected to more than 100 terrorist plots or attacks against the West, killing or injuring thousands of people. The group is now dispatching fighters into the heart of the Western world to radicalize new generations of extremists and conduct further attacks.

However al Qaeda also remains a potent terrorist threat and continues to plot against the United States and its allies. The group has expanded its reach through a direct presence, affiliates, and new followers in dozens of countries. As a result, it has more force strength and territory than it did fifteen years ago. Indeed, al Qaeda has managed to successfully embed itself in local populations and co-opt other Islamist terror groups in order to preserve itself for the long haul. While al Qaeda demonstrates greater strategic patience than ISIS, it shares similar grandiose objectives: overthrowing governments in the Muslim world, imposing a repressive religious ideology on all conquered areas, uniting the Muslim community, and confronting the West in a delusional bid for world dominance.

Today's terror surge has serious consequences for the U.S. homeland. Extremists have redoubled their efforts to send operatives to our territory, and they are influencing individuals already here to carry out acts of terror. It appears to be working. Last year there were more homegrown jihadist plots in the United States than any other year we have tracked. The violence is not random. Attacks in places like Fort Hood, Boston, Chattanooga, San Bernardino, Orlando, and elsewhere were not isolated incidents but responses to terrorists' global call for jihad. Currently, federal authorities have at least 1,000 open ISIS-related terrorism investigations across all 50 states, not to mention cases tied to other Islamist terror groups.

Our enemies have evolved in significant ways. While the ideology of Islamist militancy remains largely unchanged, their material strength and methods stand in stark contrast to the early days of Osama bin Laden. Groups like ISIS and al Qaeda are more than just loose associations of radicalized fighters. Each has developed its own indigenous military capacity on the ground, maturing in certain countries from terrorist cells into full-blown insurgencies. In some areas they have even developed their own pseudo-states, forming intricate government bureaucracies and raising revenue through taxation and trade, among other means. Terrorists have also shown a growing willingness to "subcontract" some operations, forming dangerous associations with transnational criminal groups to smuggle fighters, goods, and weapons across borders.

Moreover, terrorist groups are using digital tools to tap into wider networks for recruiting personnel and conducting operations. Social media sites and applications have been propaganda multipliers, allowing them to connect with potential followers across countries, cultures, and languages. Terrorists are likewise relying on digital tools like encryption to hide their plotting from authorities. Together, the phenomena of peer-to-peer extremism and secure communication have drastically accelerated the pace of terror. They have also allowed terrorists to quickly re-brand themselves, so while ISIS and al Qaeda are the leading terrorist threats at this moment, tomorrow it may be yet another group.

The new wave of terror is as much the result of policy failure as it is a consequence of terrorist adaptation. In particular, the current administration has mismanaged the response to the threat, focusing too narrowly on a specific group instead of the broader Islamist terror movement. Its counterterrorism strategy was largely centered on defeating “core” al Qaeda and its affiliates, leaving America strategically blind to the wider scope of the threat. Consequently, groups like ISIS thrived and new terrorist safe havens emerged unimpeded. This strategy is designed in part to reorient our understanding of the threat, to focus on the movement itself, and to revive the core principles we need to overcome it.

Despite significant changes since 9/11, the root cause of terror remains the same—a violent ideology borne out of repressive corners of the globe. The world’s seemingly endless pool of suicide bombers continues to be replenished in regions marked by autocracy, social alienation, and economic stagnation. In the Middle East and North Africa, in particular, corrupt governance and a lack of political inclusion have given rise to extremist political movements in which many terrorist leaders have found their voice. Such individuals have managed to exploit religious differences and manipulate followers into believing that their distorted ideology will be the cure to popular grievances. In turn, that ideological foundation has served as the unifying factor of a movement which has now attracted adherents from all walks of life and most countries.

WHAT DOES VICTORY LOOK LIKE?

The end goal of our nation’s counterterrorism strategy should be straightforward: defend the homeland, defeat terrorists, and deny extremists the opportunity to reemerge. While we can never fully eliminate the totalitarian ideology at its root, we can break the global movement carrying it across borders and create the conditions to prevent it from being reconstituted. This means Islamist terrorists must be rolled back and kept from finding sanctuary, and it means the wellsprings of terrorism must be replaced by stability and good governance. Ultimately, victory results in a world where Islamist terror is not a significant factor affecting U.S. national security and where its adherents are localized, uncoordinated, and only rarely able to conduct attacks.

In the meantime, we should reject the argument that pervasive terrorism is “a new normal” that the West must accept. Complacency is not an option. The evil of Islamist terrorism threatens our people’s lives, livelihoods, and way of life. We cannot falter with so much at stake. Indeed, America has never accepted a world in which the enemies of freedom are allowed to advance against us, nor should we start now. Our nation did not stand on the sidelines as communism and fascism spread, and the only acceptable course of action against the menace of Islamist terrorism is to fight forward in defense of human life, prosperity, and liberty. The United States can achieve these “ends” by pursuing the “means” outlined in this strategy.

This war will not be easy or short. It will be a generational struggle, and it will demand our fortitude and unyielding resolve. The time horizon to victory should not be measured in years but in decades. Accordingly, we need a consensus—beyond party lines and across presidencies—to stay the course. Throughout this conflict, our commander-in-chief should be frank with the American people about our progress, honest about the resources required to win, and prepared to make the moral and strategic case for continuing the fight.

Even though this is a long war, we cannot go after the enemy in slow motion. Time and space allow terrorists to build strength and advance their murderous agenda. That is why the United States and its allies must be relentless in keeping pressure on extremists, forcing them to look over their own shoulders instead of plotting new attacks. Even when they have been rolled back, we cannot consider the job done. Success demands sustained focus and a plan for lasting security and stability. Our preference should always be for local forces to carry this burden. But victory in the long run will demand American leadership—and for the sake of our nation’s security, we must be prepared to exercise it.

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II. Counterterrorism Priorities

This section lays out the Counterterrorism Priorities essential for achieving our overall goal of defending the homeland, defeating terrorists, and denying extremists the opportunity to reemerge. Each deserves high-level national security attention and must be pursued through whole-of-government efforts. As a country, we have made extraordinary progress in some of these areas, while in others our response has faltered, leaving America in greater danger. Below, each Counterterrorism Priority is explained, along with key policy actions needed to improve our response to the threat.

THWART ATTACKS AND PROTECT OUR COMMUNITIES

Our law enforcement and intelligence agencies have prevented many terrorist attacks. But they are overwhelmed by a surging threat and an adaptive enemy. Although our government made strides after 9/11 to break down the “wall” that prevented information sharing between agencies, we must make sure they have the ability to disrupt plots in a new age. It is also imperative that our communities are prepared to deal with the threat, and when terrorists strike, they must be equipped to respond quickly and recover effectively.

Enabling frontline defenders to spot and stop terror plots

Today’s dynamic terror threat demands a nimble response. Our enemies are reaching new legions of followers and converting them into operatives quicker than ever. This has made plots harder to disrupt and even harder to detect. That is why we must ensure our law enforcement and intelligence agencies have the resources, authorities, and global presence they need to stop jihadists who are seeking to do us harm.

Successful counterterrorism operations require robust, real-time information sharing. A data-point lost in the noise might be the key to disrupting a violent attack. Despite the enormous strides made in this area, more can be done to get the right information to the right people at the right time. After 9/11, intelligence fusion centers and more Joint Terrorism Task Forces were set up nationwide, recognizing that state and local law enforcement can be a force-multiplier in combating the threat. But they do not always have access to the critical information they need, which is why the U.S. government should redouble efforts to engage these frontline defenders in our counterterrorism efforts and facilitate two-way information sharing about threats.

Additionally, the U.S. government must prioritize efforts to keep up with technological change. For instance, social media should be better incorporated into investigations as well as routine criminal screening and other background checks in order to identify suspects who have openly broadcasted their support of foreign terrorist organizations. At the same time, we must maintain a strong privacy-protection infrastructure that Americans

have confidence in—and that prevents government from overstepping its bounds. Our national security professionals must always be guided by the axiom: think outside the box but never outside the Constitution.

Confronting the challenge of terrorists “going dark”

We have long worried about terrorists finding physical safe havens in which to congregate, communicate, and plan attacks. But increasingly terrorists are using “virtual safe havens” to interact online and across borders. Encrypted messaging applications have allowed extremists to recruit and plot, all while evading detection. In short, terrorists are “going dark,” causing law enforcement to “go blind.” This phenomenon is one of the greatest counterterrorism challenges of the 21st century and is making it harder to stop acts of terror.

In addressing this challenge, however, we cannot undermine the privacy of law-abiding Americans. Tools like encryption are the bedrock of Internet security, and without them the web would be a far more dangerous place. Weakening encryption would be a mistake with potentially disastrous unintended consequences. Instead, we must work together to find a path forward to keep our people—and our data—secure.

Congress should establish a national digital security commission to bring together key stakeholders, including technologists, privacy and civil liberties groups, academics, intelligence leaders, and the law enforcement community to find common ground to deal with the “going dark” phenomenon. The commission should be tasked with quickly developing actionable recommendations to protect both privacy and public safety. In the meantime, our national security institutions should adapt to an encrypted world, including developing new approaches for lawfully monitoring terror suspects, as well as putting greater emphasis on the use of human intelligence.

Protecting our transportation sector and other critical infrastructure

Terrorists still have their crosshairs set on transportation targets, especially aviation. Unfortunately, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has failed to provide the level of security and efficiency the flying public deserves. We need sweeping reform at TSA, including better integration of private-sector personnel and technologies, more serious consequences for screening failures, and improved recurrent vetting of employees to detect insider threats. It is also time to review organizations within TSA, such as the Federal Air Marshals, to ensure taxpayers are getting a right-sized, layered defense.

The U.S. government should do more to improve America’s aviation defenses overseas. Last Point of Departure (LPD) airports, which fly directly to the United States, are attractive terrorist targets because they are seen as vulnerable. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should implement more stringent requirements at LPD airports, enhance security reviews, and demand foreign airports do better counterterrorism vetting of their



employees to guard against insider threats. We should also add additional PreClearance locations worldwide, allowing U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) to clear passengers before they have even departed for the United States.

We must also be vigilant about defending our other critical infrastructure sectors. Our country needs a paradigm shift in terms of how we protect places like nuclear power plants and water treatment facilities, which should be built with cybersecurity in mind. Unfortunately, too often we are more focused on putting chain-link fences around these sites than putting digital fences around their networks. But our terrorist enemies are getting closer to developing state-like cyber hacking capabilities, so DHS must prioritize the cybersecurity of critical infrastructure right alongside physical defenses and provide the appropriate level of federal assistance.

Finally, we need to keep pace with other new technologies that might be used for terror against our critical infrastructure or soft targets, especially unmanned aerial systems. The gap between advances in drone technology and our own defenses is a serious homeland security risk. Terrorists are already integrating these devices into their toolkit and considering them for attacks. Mitigating the threats should be a top government research priority, and we must cut through red tape to make sure private-sector innovations can be easily acquired to protect sensitive sites, mass gatherings, and other potential targets.

Ensuring communities are prepared

Our communities should also be prepared to react quickly to—and recover from—terrorist attacks. We cannot stop everything. Radical Islamists are increasingly migrating toward “do-it-yourself” terror, relying on readily available weapons and homemade explosives. Such plots are easy to put together and hard to detect, so police and emergency services need the tools and training to swiftly counter these threats. Rapid response can mean the difference between close calls and catastrophe.

Often the best line of defense is someone willing to report something that seems out of the ordinary. The federal government should bolster its work with communities to promote see-something-say-something campaigns, including expanding them beyond large metropolitan areas. However, these public awareness efforts must be made geographically relevant, kept up-to-date with changes in the threat environment, and provide easy reporting options. That includes giving members of the public a better sense of what to look out for and offering an array of methods for flagging suspicious activity (e.g. by telephone, text messages, and more).

Our layered defenses must also include automated threat detection, such as tripwires for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive threats. We have failed since 9/11 to develop a reliable system for detecting weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in urban areas and spotting warning signs of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). It is time for a nationwide overhaul of these efforts to help communities access the right defense tools. This includes streamlining and consolidating DHS's scattered WMD defense programs and doing more to help state and local agencies protect against IED threats.

America's first responders need the training, tools, and information to respond to an ever-changing threat landscape. For instance, DHS should maintain a program for helping communities keep up with the most likely terror attack scenarios, such as through active-shooter training, and working to develop best practices for disrupting such attacks and minimizing loss of life. DHS must also improve communication with communities about new terrorist tactics, especially those seen overseas, and how to thwart them.

Reforming our national security institutions

Terrorists are moving at the speed of broadband, so we cannot move at the speed of bureaucracy. We must reform and improve our security agencies so they can stay ahead of the threat. Many agencies have not adapted quickly enough or are not prioritizing resources where they are needed most. We cannot be focused on fighting yesterday's battles; we should be prepared to protect our people against what we are seeing today and what dangers we expect to encounter in the future.

Terrorists are moving at the speed of broadband,
so we cannot move at the speed of bureaucracy.

The president must begin by restructuring the National Security Council (NSC). The NSC is the nerve center of presidential decision-making, but it has become bloated, bureaucratic, and unwieldy. The NSC needs a critical rebalancing to ensure the commander-in-chief is well-informed but not paralyzed by process. Moreover, the FBI and DHS are still in

need of reform in order to become intelligence-driven counterterrorism organizations. Congress must also implement one of the 9/11 Commission's remaining recommendations by consolidating oversight of DHS into "a single, principal point of oversight." Far too many Congressional committees currently oversee DHS, a fractured system that results in waste, overlap, and duplication and stymies legislative efforts to make America safe.

The Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community must also get better at leveraging each other's unique capabilities and reducing redundancies. Congress should conduct a full review of the Department of Defense intelligence enterprise and make recommendations to streamline mission functions and eliminate programs that do not directly support the warfighter. Congress should also continually monitor the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency reorganization efforts to ensure that intelligence professionals have the support they need to protect the homeland and advance America's interests abroad.

STOP RECRUITMENT AND RADICALIZATION AT HOME

Foreign terrorist organizations are enlisting Americans at record levels to join them overseas and to conduct attacks here at home. Yet, since 9/11, too little has been done to combat the threat from within. While our allies are developing counter-radicalization programs, the United States has failed by almost every measure and across presidential administrations of both parties. We must make it a focus and a priority to stop terrorist recruitment within our borders and prevent Americans from being radicalized, particularly by Islamist terrorist propaganda.

Helping communities catch red flags

In the United States, a majority of recent homegrown jihadist plots have been disrupted thanks in part to citizen engagement. Whether it was a tip to law enforcement from a family member, a friend, a concerned citizen, or an informant, community awareness has been pivotal in helping to identify radicalized suspects. But too often the warning signs go unnoticed, unreported, or unresolved. We saw this in Fort Hood, Boston, Chattanooga, San Bernardino, and Orlando.

Unfortunately, there are scant federal resources—dollars, training, or personnel—for addressing this crisis. It is time for a top-to-bottom fix, starting with greater White House action to unify national efforts to counter terrorist recruitment and radicalization. Next, we need a 50-state strategy that is coordinated strategically and executed locally to deal with the threat. This should be developed hand-in-hand with America's governors. Federal agencies will need to help scale-up community outreach and make localities more aware of Islamist terror recruitment targeting their citizens. For instance, agencies should use the existing nationwide network of fusion centers to expand threat awareness briefings and should pilot confidential tip lines to allow members of the public to report concerns, not

just about suspicious activity (as noted earlier) but about possible terrorist radicalization in their communities. Where possible, though, counter-radicalization efforts should be run at the local level, with the federal government empowering key stakeholders through best practices, guidance, and other enabling tools.

Training must also be expanded nationwide to help individuals identify radicalization warning signs. This includes tailored guidance for police, educators, prosecutors, probation officers, mental health professionals, religious leaders, and more. While any guidance must be designed from the start to prevent unlawful discrimination, we cannot be paralyzed by political correctness. Our counter-radicalization efforts should clearly identify the major threat we face today—radical Islamist terror. But in this fight, federal, state, and local law enforcement should prioritize building trust in Muslim communities and should vigilantly guard against alienation. In furtherance of this goal, DHS should facilitate outreach groups nationwide to broker closer engagement between law enforcement and the Muslim community.

Developing “off-ramps” to radicalization

It is not enough for us to simply identify suspects who have been radicalized by Islamist terror groups. We need to mitigate the threat. If they commit crimes, they should be arrested and prosecuted, but often these individuals exist in a gray area—ticking time bombs on an unpredictable path to violence. It is important for law enforcement agencies to have alternatives, such as “off-ramps” to radicalization, beyond waiting for a suspect to commit a crime. For instance, authorities often lack enough evidence to prosecute people who have come home from terrorist safe havens; instead, they are forced to monitor these “returnees” at great cost.

The federal government should develop interagency standards for intervening to prevent violent radicalization. A number of America’s foreign partners already operate counter-radicalization programs, and we should examine their best-practices. At the same time, we must recognize that certain efforts are incompatible with our democratic system and individual rights, and the U.S. government should avoid directly operating its own de-radicalization programs. Instead, off-ramps might include voluntary referrals to mental health professionals or to non-profits with data-validated strategies and programs. Ultimately, investigators and prosecutors should have a better picture of their options and follow clear legal guidance, rather than conducting makeshift interventions.

Counter-messaging at home

The United States currently spends millions of taxpayer dollars fighting terrorist propaganda overseas, but there are virtually no complementary efforts here at home. Indeed, recent administrations have largely failed to develop even a basic domestic “counter-messaging”

effort to blunt the propaganda of extremist groups. In the meantime, jihadists are successfully inspiring susceptible Americans over the internet to join their cause, using 21st century technology to promote their seventh century ideology.

Congress should require DHS and its federal partners to develop a counter-messaging program specifically targeting Islamist terrorism. Rather than issue government-sponsored messages, the effort must focus on empowering credible voices, including former extremists, family members affected by terror, moderate religious figures, and others who are likely to dissuade potential extremists. The program should consist of grant funding for non-profits and local groups, public-private partnerships, forums to share actionable best-practices, and assistance in developing youth networks. Our goal should be to identify approaches that work, develop our own best practices, replicate successful efforts where practicable, and abandon those that are not effective. Agencies should also regularly engage stakeholders to discuss changes in the threat environment and to help customize counter-messaging accordingly.

Social media companies are on the virtual frontlines of the fight and must be proactive in removing terrorist content. They should ensure that their terms and conditions expressly prohibit such material and that take-downs are done quickly to prevent extremist messages from spreading. Companies could also use emerging technologies to automate flagging of questionable content, such as those already in place to detect child pornography. Additionally, the tech sector should continue to examine ways to redirect potential extremists from jihadist content and toward counter-messaging that pushes back against warped terrorist narratives.

Preventing prisons from becoming terror breeding grounds

As the number of convicted homegrown terrorists grows, so does the risk that our prisons will become wellsprings of fanaticism. The problem of so-called “jailhouse jihadists” is not new. Many notorious terrorist operatives were first radicalized in prisons, typically overseas. But the problem is getting worse in the United States. Since 9/11, a rising number of prisoners have become radicalized while behind bars and, once released, have plotted attacks or traveled overseas to fight in terror hotspots.

The federal government must examine non-governmental rehabilitation options for convicted terrorists to prevent more individuals from entering the prison system primed to spread their hateful ideology. The Bureau of Prisons should also take steps to combat prison radicalization, including proactively monitoring known extremists and putting measures in place to prevent them from inspiring fellow inmates to embrace terror. Additionally, outside groups that work with prisoners should be regularly vetted to weed out organizations which advocate extremism.

KEEP TERRORISTS OUT OF AMERICA

Foreign terrorists are still determined to infiltrate the United States, but since 9/11 we have made dramatic security improvements to keep them out. Nevertheless, serious gaps remain in our defenses, especially at the border and in our immigration system. We must constantly reassess our defenses in order to shut down all routes Islamist militants might use to slip into our country undetected.

Focusing our efforts

It has been a decade since the Executive Branch produced a whole-of-government plan to prevent terrorists from entering our country—a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission. The threat has changed considerably since then. The federal government operates hundreds of initiatives with a nexus to stopping terrorist travel, but without an overarching strategy to coordinate them, the United States may be wasting taxpayer dollars and failing to allocate resources where they are needed most.

The White House should produce a strategy to combat terrorist travel and to prevent Americans from leaving to join terrorist organizations. The strategy should also include an annual audit of relevant government programs, propose reforms to keep pace with the threat, and outline an action plan to fix weaknesses. Moreover, Congress should direct federal agencies to regularly “red-team” test our security programs to identify possible terrorist pathways and security vulnerabilities.

Identifying and interdicting terror suspects

Before 2001, the United States lacked a single list of suspected terrorists. As a result, even terrorists who were known to intelligence agencies managed to escape detection and travel into America. The White House and Congress eventually required the creation of an integrated terrorist watchlist, and today our country has the most sophisticated watchlisting and screening system in the world. It has been a critical tool for identifying and interdicting extremists. Still, there have since been failures of the system, and it has been years since a full-scale review was conducted.

Congress should mandate regular, independent assessments of the watchlisting process to ensure it is meeting intended objectives and all relevant intelligence information is being incorporated quickly from across the government. It should also examine how to further integrate terrorist watchlisting and screening activities across the federal government and with state and local stakeholders. Currently, many agencies have a hand in different parts of the vetting process for admitting U.S. visitors and immigrants, and coordination might be improved through co-location or consolidation. Additionally, we should put additional resources and effort into identifying previously unknown extremists through better analysis and integration of law enforcement and intelligence data.

We rely heavily on our foreign partners to alert us to potential terror suspects. With extremism spreading at record rates, timely notification is important so we can get names into our systems and prevent those individuals from entering our country. Unfortunately, many countries still share terrorist identities with the United States in a manner that is ad hoc, intermittent, and often incomplete—putting us at greater risk. The U.S. government must hold countries accountable if they fail to share counterterrorism intelligence promptly, especially those countries which have signed agreements to do so. The White House should report regularly to Congress on these agreements, compliance, and measures to increase timely reporting. Moreover, U.S. agencies should make it a priority to expand real-time and automated information sharing with our allies to replace existing informal mechanisms for passing terrorist identity information.

Enhancing screening of visitors, immigrants, and refugees

Terrorists have used almost every route to enter our country, including posing as tourists, students, aspiring citizens, and refugees. Each of the 9/11 hijackers came into the United States through legal means. In addition to enhancing the terrorist watchlist to screen foreign visitors, we need to be on the lookout for Islamist militants who might not be on our radar or who are disguising their identities. U.S. border authorities and law enforcement must maintain rigorous document security checks and continue to develop advanced biometric capabilities to validate traveler identities. We should also improve the ability of our frontline screeners to pass back information gathered at checkpoints which might help identify terror suspects.

We are a nation of immigrants, but we cannot allow that heritage to be abused by terrorists who exploit weaknesses in the system. America must tighten up security at all stages of the immigration process and bring it into the social media age. For instance, if applicants have pledged support for a terrorist group online, we cannot afford to detect it after they have entered the United States. In today's world, an applicant's social media presence might be as important to review as his or her work history and education. Accordingly, we need to ramp up visa security, moving our investigations into the digital age. DHS should expand its Visa Security Program to conduct security reviews of visa applicants earlier in the process and in greater depth. Additionally, DHS and the State Department must pilot use of deception-detection technologies in the visa interview process and hire more native speakers to conduct interviews.

Despite recent changes, more can also be done to improve the security of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows citizens of certain countries to travel visa-free to the United States. Congress should require participating countries to make further security upgrades so it is harder for terrorists to reach their territory—thereby also making it more difficult for such individuals to travel onward to the United States. For instance, Congress could explore requiring VWP countries to conduct standard counterterrorism checks on all travelers and immigrants entering and exiting their territory, to conduct advanced targeting of airline passenger manifests and related data, to implement secure real-time intelligence sharing tools with us, and more.

It is also important for us to improve interior immigration enforcement in the United States by applying the law. Moreover, if extremists manage to enter illegally, we should be able to find out if they are still here, which requires DHS to improve tracking of aliens in the United States. Today we lack the tools to comprehensively verify whether visitors actually leave the country after their visas expire, despite legal requirements for the government to do so. We must establish, once and for all, an effective entry-exit border control system for tracking visitors to our country.

Finally, it is imperative that we overhaul the refugee screening process to implement stronger safeguards. America has a proud tradition of welcoming innocent civilians fleeing violence and instability. But terrorists have pledged to exploit humanitarian programs in order to slip into the West and attack us, and they have already done so in Europe. Our top law enforcement and intelligence officials have expressed grave concern about these threats, which is why we must adopt measures to weed out terror suspects so that legitimate refugees can be resettled safely without compromising our security. We should give federal law enforcement and the intelligence community a more powerful voice in the decision to admit subjects from high-terror threat regions, mandate that the FBI validate the integrity of the background check process for refugees, require agencies to complete a fraud assessment of the refugee-processing system, and regularly review the digital footprint of applicants in addition to standard data.

Securing the border and pushing our defenses outward

Americans know our borders are not secure—and so do terrorists. The problem is vast and any solution will require a serious and sustained commitment of time and resources. Our southern border is nearly 2,000 miles long, and the northern border is twice that length,



in addition to the thousands of miles of our maritime border we must patrol and monitor. Glaring weaknesses provide violent extremists with a potential path into our country.

Our goal must be to develop integrated situational awareness at our borders and deploy cutting-edge tools to stop illegal traffic. Not only do we need robust fencing and barriers, we need a multi-layered approach to prevent illegal entrants from defeating any one part of our security. Due to the diverse terrain across our long borders, every area requires a different mix of assets, from CBP agents and strong fencing to aerial surveillance and radar. We should also provide the CBP with easy access to federal lands in order to facilitate enforcement activities.

But border security is about more than just catching those who cross illegally. It is about deterrence. DHS must deploy the right assets to the right places so that terrorists are convinced they will be detected in real time, not after they have disappeared into our country. We should also redouble our efforts to equip ports of entry, frontline defenders, and other partners with the critical tripwires for detecting possible WMD threats before they are smuggled into America and used against our people.

It must also be the policy of the United States to push our border security outward, as noted earlier. DHS should continue to expand programs like PreClearance, as noted earlier, which is aimed at conducting U.S. inspections of passengers and goods in foreign countries—before they are even bound for the United States. This must be coupled with renewed emphasis on border security in our hemisphere, including working with the Latin American countries to prevent terrorist infiltration and to crack down on human smuggling routes that lead to our territory.

TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE ENEMY

America must take the fight to the enemy so that our homeland does not become the primary battleground. This requires decisive action, a broad international coalition, and a strategy to deny terrorists the ability to attack the United States, our allies, and our interests. Unfortunately, in recent years we have failed to keep the pressure on the broad array of Islamist terrorists who threaten us. To defeat these fanatics, we must strike the enemy where they are, eliminate their sanctuaries, and prevent them from passing the torch to a new generation.

Terrorists are not constrained by oceans or borders—so to win, we cannot be either.

Confronting terrorists and denying them safe haven

The most effective methods for preventing terrorist attacks in the short term are to keep our enemies on the run and remove them from the battlefield. Accordingly, we must use all elements of national power, including military force, to neutralize the threat on the ground. The United States leads the world in the sophistication of its counterterrorism programs, and we cannot hesitate to deploy them in order to destroy terrorist networks overseas before extremists have an opportunity to carry out attacks against the homeland.

Terrorists are not constrained by oceans or borders—so to win, we cannot be either. We must be precise, lethal, and focused on keeping our enemies looking over their shoulders instead of conspiring to do us harm. While our preference must always be for local forces to lead the fight (as further described below), the United States should be ready to step in when it means the difference between success and failure. We cannot tolerate the failure of foreign governments to properly contain threats within their territory, so we should always reserve the right to strike terrorists with our allies or unilaterally when they pose an imminent threat to our country and its interests.

The United States must also confront terrorists in their “virtual safe havens” in cyberspace. ISIS’s ability to attract foreign fighters and recruit online has created a paradigm shift in counterterrorism operations. It is no longer enough to remove combatants from the battlefield if their fellow operatives can turn to the Internet to inspire thousands more. Washington has failed to establish an adequate system for offensive cyber operations against terrorists’ virtual networks, so we must establish a clear policy for when and how to take such actions.

It is likewise imperative that we have the intelligence needed to target the enemy and track their movements. The Intelligence Community plays a central role in monitoring Islamist terror threats and disrupting attacks. But it is struggling to keep up with warfighter and policymaker demands and has been hindered by self-imposed restrictions beyond what the law requires. Terrorists are also getting better at communicating securely and hiding their tracks online. Meanwhile, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms face chronic manpower shortages, reducing our tactical insight into terrorists’ day-to-day activities.

The president should convene the NSC to put together a plan for global coverage of Islamist terror threats—including proposals for a “renewed intelligence offensive” against the enemy. That plan should address five overlapping issues: intelligence authorities, global collection gaps, resource allocation between the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community, next generation technologies, and the encryption challenge. The goal should be to make sure we are leaning forward in the fight, within the letter of the law.

For instance, a 2014 White House order has handicapped our intelligence collectors by granting foreign nationals privacy protections that are similar to those afforded to U.S.



citizens under the Constitution; the collection restrictions are not necessary or required by law and should be rolled back. Moreover, the president should conduct a review of all relevant counterterrorism authorities and related intelligence collection activities and report to Congress on any necessary statutory enhancements or adjustments. As part of this effort, the White House should work with Congress to reauthorize key intelligence authorities, including Section 702 of the *Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Amendments Act of 2008*.

Providing our warfighters with the means for victory

While it is up to the commander-in-chief to persuade the American people that it is in our country's best interest to pursue Islamist terrorists, it is the job of both the president *and* Congress to make sure we have the tools to win. That includes the broad legal authorities and policies needed to prosecute the conflict. The next president should work with Congress to develop and approve a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force to guide our efforts in the overall conflict. The updated authorization should reflect an understanding that this is a global fight against an evolving enemy—and one that requires pursuing extremists, using appropriate means, *whoever* and *wherever* they are.

The White House must set the tone without micromanaging the war effort. In recent years, our military commanders have been stymied by cumbersome bureaucratic processes and endless executive deliberation at the highest levels. Yet our success depends on clear rules of the road and decisiveness. Military leaders should not have to ask for permission

to strike on a case-by-case basis. We have a formidable opponent, yet at times we are fighting ourselves more than we are fighting them. The president should give the Pentagon the flexibility it needs to make operational decisions in the field and let commanders know that they have White House support to make tough calls. The president should also lift onerous targeting restrictions, recognizing that it is possible to respect the laws of war without being risk-averse.

Unsurprisingly, the words of the commander-in-chief play an important role in the fight against terrorism. International and domestic audiences pay close attention to messaging from the White House. In particular, our adversaries note when the president takes military options off the table, sets withdrawal timelines, and refuses to enforce redlines. That is why the United States president must keep all options when fighting terrorism open and demonstrate that we will stand by our stated commitments and demands. We cannot telegraph weakness to our enemies because when we do it encourages them to press the advantage against us.

Warfighters should be able to call upon our nation's innovation to win this fight, including new technologies. The private sector has a wealth of tools that can be used to support our efforts, but companies often are discouraged from assisting when they run into excessive rules, regulations, and an innovation-stifling procurement process. The president and Congress should act in concert to connect entrepreneurs and innovators with government stakeholders and, in doing so, should remove bureaucratic red tape that prevents our warfighters from getting what they need.

Structuring our forces for the long war

Our military is over-stretched and under-resourced for the current struggle. Indeed, in some areas, U.S. military readiness and personnel have slipped to pre-World War II levels. Testimony from senior defense officials indicates that the nation does not have ability to fight two wars simultaneously, a major policy requirement for decades. Unrelenting budget pressure and new requirements are putting our critical military capabilities at risk, including the capacity to project force worldwide, so we must take action.

Conventional military forces play a number of important roles in the nation's counterterrorism efforts and must be structured and resourced appropriately to achieve their missions. We cannot expect our allies to increase their commitments to international security while we decrease ours. Nor can we expect to deter and defeat our adversaries by drawing down our forces and capabilities. We must maintain a fighting force that is prepared to confront the challenges of a new age while being appropriately equipped to face both state and non-state actors, especially terrorist groups. Congress and the president should work to provide the Pentagon with budget relief and develop a five-year plan to return our forces to where they need to be to win this war.

Similarly, our special operators are the tip of the spear in the fight with terrorists. Yet despite serving as a cornerstone of U.S. counterterrorism policy, America's Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been subject to high demand, expanding mission requirements, and a withering operational tempo. The White House should conduct a full evaluation of the SOF counterterrorism role and assess the long-term impacts of unrelenting deployments on personnel, material, and the military overall. The SOF community is small, and the president must recognize that these units cannot act as a substitute for good policy. Following this review, the president should submit to Congress a plan for strengthening our current SOF elements to ensure they can fully meet the long-term demands of the war against Islamist terror, including any additional resources that are needed.

Given the challenging threat environment, the Intelligence Community will also be called on to operate in dangerous and hard-to-reach places where there is no official U.S. government presence or conventional local partners to work with. In these cases, we must provide intelligence operatives with improved expeditionary capabilities to collect critical information, including the right training and tools to maneuver with a light footprint and maximum agility.

Enabling local partners and building strong international coalitions

The United States must adopt a "friendly-forces-first" mentality, pressuring reliable local units to take the lead against terrorists. Where necessary, America should advise and assist these partners through training and intelligence sharing. Indeed, locals have greater legitimacy in providing security than outsiders and vastly greater insight into their own communities. But if indigenous forces cannot bear the burden, our next preference should be to urge regional coalitions to attack the problem. Especially in the Middle East and North Africa, we should insist that leaders assume greater responsibility for neutralizing threats in their own neighborhoods, while offering to help empower them to counter Islamist terrorists who are attempting to overrun their lands.

However, when American military might is used as a last resort, the United States should be prepared to get the job done. In such cases, we must bring the full weight of an international coalition to decimate terrorist groups, while also leaning on local partners for battlefield access, intelligence, expertise, and unique capabilities. Washington should identify these partners and use whatever means necessary to encourage them to fight forward. Where formal partnerships do not exist, the United States should work either directly or with other nations to recruit indigenous forces to operate alongside our own.

Because counterterrorism is a shared responsibility, the United States should assemble a more robust international coalition to confront jihadists. The Western world is under siege, which is why organizations like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must be more active in the fight. We must reexamine NATO readiness levels and prepare the organization to assume a bigger role in countering terrorism worldwide. NATO should help take the lead in integrating allied command-and-control to reflect the scale of the global

war in which we are engaged. That will require joint planning and joint execution, as well as deeper intelligence cooperation with foreign partners. But a coalition is not a substitute for American leadership. To get others to join us, the United States must lead the charge because when we are absent, our partners step back and our adversaries step up.

COMBAT TERRORIST TRAVEL AND CUT OFF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

To function, terrorist groups must be able to get both personnel and funds across borders. Both areas offer opportunities for disruption. Yet many countries still operate in a pre-9/11 mentality, lacking the necessary tools to interrupt terrorist movements and to cut off their cash. Moreover, groups like ISIS and al Qaeda have diversified their revenue streams, making them harder to shut down. The United States should pressure our allies to do more to combat terrorist travel and finance, and where necessary for our security, we should offer assistance and expertise to help them do so.

Closing overseas security gaps to disrupt terrorist movements

Gaping overseas security holes are making it easier for terror suspects to crisscross borders, and jihadists are well aware of these vulnerabilities. Europe is of particular concern because most Europeans can travel easily to the United States without visas, yet many of their countries lack the necessary border security, traveler screening, intelligence, legal, and law-enforcement mechanisms to disrupt terrorist travel. This puts America at risk by making it easier for European terrorists—and others who relocate to the continent—to eventually travel to the United States.

We need to get a better handle on the scope of the problem in order to target our response. Congress should require the State Department to coordinate an annual risk-based assessment of terrorist-travel weaknesses in foreign countries and to issue an annual scorecard ranking those governments that are meeting minimum standards of combating terrorist travel and those that are not. This will allow us to focus our attention where it is needed most. The White House should also make clear to governments that we will use a combination of carrots and sticks to deal with the problem.

To turn up the pressure, Congress should authorize the Secretary of State to suspend non-humanitarian, non-trade-related assistance to countries that fail to meet the minimum standards for combating terrorist travel. Such a move would send a strong signal that the United States is serious about holding countries accountable. We should also make further security improvements to the VWP, which allows citizens of participating countries to travel visa-free to America for up to 90 days. As noted earlier, in exchange for continued participation in the program, Congress could explore requiring VWP countries to conduct enhanced counterterrorism checks on all travelers and immigrants entering and exiting their territory, perform advanced targeting of airline passenger manifests and related data, implement secure real-time intelligence sharing tools with us, and more.

But we must also offer to lend a hand, recognizing that some allies lack the capacity to crack down on terrorist travel. Federal agencies already offer a number of programs to help governments tackle the threat; Congress should mandate better coordination between those programs and that they be streamlined and prioritized toward the highest-risk countries. We should also propose a “Marshall Plan”-style program of grants and loans to governments that cannot get adequate security measures in place quickly enough to combat terrorist travel. The package would offer U.S. expertise and tailored technology solutions, such as watchlisting and screening technology, to eligible countries.

Enhancing international intelligence sharing

Counterterrorism information is crossing borders more slowly than the extremists themselves. A number of our allies have slashed defense and intelligence budgets in the decades since the Cold War ended. Those cuts, combined with a surge in cases involving terrorists and homegrown violent extremists, have put serious strain on security services. This makes intelligence information sharing all the more important. But many of our trusted allies, including in Europe, still have barriers in place—including bureaucratic stovepipes, turf battles, and data privacy laws—that prevent robust intelligence sharing internally and with other countries.

America should play a leading role in bolstering international intelligence sharing related to terror suspects, plots, and finances and helping our allies overcome barriers. The White House should regularly press our foreign partners to improve such exchanges and offer to broker engagement where needed. Additionally, U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies must help our allies make best use of the data to which they already have access. For instance, nearly all countries are connected to INTERPOL’s law enforcement databases, which contain information for stopping terrorists and criminals, but many do not have the systems in place to use that information at borders, airports, and in routine police activity. We can provide the technical expertise and tools to help these governments leverage that data more effectively.

The United States must also sign Homeland Security Presidential Directive-6 (HSPD-6) agreements—reciprocal pacts to share terrorist identity information—with more countries. These arrangements allow us to swap terrorist watchlists more transparently and quickly with other governments to ensure that we are on the lookout for all relevant suspects and that our partners are, too. The more countries that use the data from our sophisticated terrorist watchlists, the more likely extremists are to be caught as they travel around the world.

Targeting terrorist finances and revenue streams

The march of Islamist terrorism across the globe is fueled not just by a hateful ideology but also by a constant cash flow. We cannot destroy radical groups without cutting off their revenue streams. Unfortunately, we have failed to go after these income sources fast

enough, and terrorists are quickly diversifying their sources of income. Many of the post-9/11 tools are also less relevant due to rapid advancements in financial services technology.

The United States and its coalition partners in the war against Islamist terror must go after terrorists' cash as aggressively as their operational nodes. In this regard, our military has been hamstrung on the battlefield in recent years by cumbersome rules and restrictions. The White House should provide top-level guidance and broad authority to our commanders to hit targets that allow extremists to raise revenue, such as oil infrastructure, while still adhering to the laws of war. We must also make sure the Treasury Department and our intelligence community are keeping pace with changes in financial services technology—including mobile payments and crypto currency such as Bitcoin—in order to target terrorist transactions and cash reserves.

It is important for us to hold other governments accountable. Groups like ISIS and al Qaeda have been able to withstand targeted sanctions against them because few countries implement such restrictions, and many governments lack the expertise to prosecute terror-related financial crimes. Extremists continue to receive financial assistance from supporters in permissive Gulf states and other nations that have failed to crack down on the problem. We should exchange legal and investigative best practices with governments, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, to identify and freeze terrorist assets, as well as to prosecute individuals for providing terrorists with material support.

Lastly, the United States should assemble foreign governments to confront the issue of kidnap-for-ransom. Terrorists have turned hostage-taking into a big business, and foreign countries are wittingly bankrolling such groups by paying exorbitant ransoms. As a result, more innocent people are put in danger and the cycle continues. The practice cannot be tolerated and it must stop. Sadly, we are not immune to criticism, as our “no negotiation” stance toward terrorist groups who kidnap U.S. persons has been weakened by recent policy changes and foreign policy actions. However, it must be the policy of the United States to never negotiate with terrorists, to discourage private organizations and individuals from paying ransom, and to hold foreign governments accountable for failure to stand against ransom payments to terrorists.

DENY JIHADISTS ACCESS TO WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Terrorists have long had the willingness to develop and acquire WMD—including chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons—and the intent to use them. For years, though, their capabilities have lagged behind their aspirations. However, terrorist groups are increasingly capable of producing and procuring such deadly tools. ISIS, for instance, has deployed chemical weapons on the battlefield. We cannot wait until our enemies unleash such terrible weapons against us. We must proactively prevent them from acquiring WMD materials.

Targeting weapon of mass destruction expertise, tools, and technology

On the battlefield, we must make it a leading priority to degrade and destroy terrorists' access to WMD expertise, tools, and technology. That means our military and intelligence professionals must continue to target terrorist operatives who are focused on developing such capabilities. We must also be aware of indigenous scientific expertise in areas controlled or influenced by terrorist groups, such as population centers where terrorists might be able to coerce experts—or gain access to sensitive sites or facilities—to develop such weapons. Moreover, we need good intelligence in order to target terrorist proliferation networks, including insight into the intentions of state sponsors of terror who might supply WMD-related materials to jihadists and rogue individuals and criminal nodes which could facilitate the acquisition of these weapons. The United States should use this information to disrupt proliferation activities and make sure WMD capabilities do not fall into the wrong hands.

Shutting down potential proliferation pathways

Even lone actors, such as Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, can single-handedly remake the threat landscape by disseminating WMD technology and expertise. Congress and the president must ensure the Intelligence Community has the resources to track actors that traffic illicit WMD-related material, and it should be our policy to help other nations secure their stockpiles and sensitive facilities against the threat of theft or terrorism. Insiders such as Khan represent a real potential danger, which is why we should also prioritize efforts to help foreign partners identify insider threats.

Overall, the United States must reserve use of all diplomatic, economic, and military levers to stop the spread of WMD. We should work closely with our allies to deter potential proliferators and continue to put pressure on members of the international community to monitor “dual-use” technologies and processes. When foreign governments falter, the United States must be prepared to use sanctions—or the threat of sanctions—to change their behavior and punish violators. Furthermore, our military and intelligence services should be ready to move at a moment's notice if it appears WMD might fall into the wrong hands.

We should also be aware of how our broader geopolitical priorities can affect proliferation outcomes, and adjust U.S. policy accordingly. The misguided nuclear deal with Iran, for instance, has the potential to upend the balance of power in the region and create a cascade of proliferation as states seek to counter-balance the regime in Tehran. To prevent this, Washington should maintain U.S. security guarantees with international partners, particularly in the Middle East, to discourage regional proliferation.

Reinforcing the global detection network

If we fail to prevent terrorists from acquiring WMD, we must be able to detect such weapons in transit before they are used against their intended targets. Administrations of both parties have worked closely with our allies to make sure there are “tripwires” in place to detect dangerous materials crossing borders or in major urban areas. But we have not gone far enough. The global detection architecture for WMD threats is lopsided and replete with security weaknesses.

With our allies, the White House should undertake a multilateral audit of WMD-detection networks and prioritize the highest-risk areas for immediate improvement. Although mass-casualty attacks with chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons are still difficult for terrorists to execute—and are at a lower probability than other types of attacks—they are still high-consequence scenarios that demand our vigilance. Tripwire detection systems might be our last line of defense against catastrophe; therefore, the United States must ensure our allies have the appropriate equipment and expertise to identify radiation signatures and the presence of biological and chemical agents at critical transit points and in population centers.

BLOCK TERRORISTS FROM RETURNING TO THE BATTLEFIELD

The United States currently lacks a coherent detention and interrogation policy in the war against Islamist terror. As a result, we have undoubtedly lost out on critical intelligence about terrorist networks, and we have needlessly let dangerous jihadists return to the battlefield. The United States needs to develop a comprehensive plan for detaining, interrogating, prosecuting, and imprisoning terrorists. Two clear goals should drive our policy: protecting American lives and delivering justice. When executing this plan, our country can—and should—strike the balance between American values and the security of our citizens.

Detaining and interrogating terror suspects

There are three primary ways to gather intelligence from Islamist terrorists: we can infiltrate their networks, intercept their communications, or interrogate their operatives. We have gotten better at the first, are losing our ability to do the second, and—as a result of policy failure—have all but stopped doing the third. The current Administration’s reluctance to detain and interrogate terror suspects has, paradoxically, biased the system in favor of lethal operations. Yet when we kill terrorists instead of capturing them, we lose out on potentially valuable information that could be used to degrade their groups further.

Today, our military and intelligence operators are hamstrung by policies that prevent them from holding onto terrorists and gathering critical intelligence. It is not clear, for example, where detained terrorists should be taken after their initial capture and who can have

access to question them. Existing policies often preclude us from holding ISIS extremists for more than 30 days without special approvals and forbid their transfer to the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In practice, this can result in terrorists being handed off to unreliable foreign governments or simply being released.

The present situation is untenable. Most terrorists we confront on the overseas battlefield are unlawful enemy combatants, and we should have an appropriate system for treating them as such. Frontline operators must be confident they can detain suspects and interrogate them—consistent with the laws of war—to get the intelligence we need to quickly take down networks and save lives. To fix the problem, the White House should issue clear, revised guidance on how to handle terrorists captured on the battlefield. The guidance should be written to give our operators the wide but appropriate flexibility needed to routinely capture and debrief terror suspects, recognizing that this is a global conflict against an enemy that knows no borders.

Keeping terrorists in custody and bringing them to justice

We are fighting a war, and we must have a place to detain the enemy in the long run. Additionally, we must recognize that terrorists can remain of intelligence value long after capture, providing insight into organizations and operatives that would be otherwise hard to acquire. As noted above, most of these suspects are unlawful enemy combatants. They have violated the laws of war and must be dealt with accordingly.

Yet the current administration has sought to deliberately and systematically dismantle our only existing terrorist prison, Guantanamo Bay, leaving us with two risky options for current detainees: let terrorists go free by sending them to foreign countries, or bring them to the United States. Neither option is acceptable for the security of United States. The Intelligence Community believes around one-third of released detainees have returned to the fight, while suspects transferred to U.S. prisons would put our communities in the crosshairs by making them terrorist targets.

Congress must keep the facility at Guantanamo open and prepare for its population to be expanded. The president should designate the prison as a principal, long-term detention site for captured foreign terrorists. But he or she should also ensure we maintain the flexibility to use other appropriate locations to detain extremists in the conflict. This will give our commanders the confidence that when our forces and foreign partners risk their lives to catch hardened terrorists, they are not doing so in vain. We should likewise renew our effort to bring justice to these captured jihadists, including prosecuting them under the system set up by Congress and in other courts as needed, and ensuring they remain behind bars for their heinous plots and crimes.

Improving tracking of released extremists at home and abroad

In cases where we are required to release extremists or convicted terrorists, we should have better plans in place for monitoring them. We continue to rely heavily on foreign partners to track these fighters. However, we cannot blindly outsource this war. When the United States transfers former detainees to other countries, we need clearer assurances that our partners will monitor them and develop contingency plans to prevent them from rejoining their fellow militants. The failure to do so thus far has allowed many jihadists to slip through the cracks and return to the battlefield.

Here at home, a wave of terrorists convicted after 9/11 will soon finish their sentences and be freed from prison. While these individuals have served their time, some may remain radicalized. Sadly, the U.S. government has no articulated policy or plans for handling the pending cascade of releases. At a minimum, federal authorities should routinely notify state and local law enforcement agencies about pending releases so they can be on alert for signs of renewed plotting. Furthermore, Congress should examine laws currently being considered in some states to create terrorist registries—similar to sex offender registries—to keep communities safe, and consider the appropriate federal role in these efforts.

PREVENT THE EMERGENCE OF NEW NETWORKS AND SAFE HAVENS

The 9/11 Commission’s top recommendation was to prevent the emergence of terrorist safe havens, yet we have failed to live up to that goal—and at great cost to the free world. Terrorists have exploited power vacuums to expand their territory, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, giving them space to grow and plot against us. They have also used their safe havens to bring their backwards vision to life, including by repressing local populations under strict Sharia law. We must reassert American influence to prevent power vacuums from becoming terror hotbeds, and in the long run, ensure such areas develop stability and good governance. In particular, we must not abandon Afghanistan and its people to the Taliban, who have shown no remorse for sheltering al Qaeda before 9/11.

Keeping ungoverned spaces and failed states from being exploited by extremists

History has shown that if we allow Islamist terrorists to establish a territorial foothold, they will be more effective in attacking us around the globe. They exploit ungoverned spaces to find sanctuary, where they solicit recruits and plot terrorist attacks. Now, these militants can project their violence faster than ever before and well beyond their safe havens, so we must act more decisively to stop these hotbeds from emerging in the first place. The rise of ISIS is proof that we cannot wait while threats gather, nor can we simply contain them.

It must be the policy of the United States to quickly identify actual or potential terrorist safe havens and, along with our allies, develop tailored strategies to make sure each is secured against terrorist control. The president should direct the NSC to regularly assess

the threat map and our existing strategies for preventing lawless sanctuaries, prioritized by risk, and keep Congress apprised. Each will require a different approach, from counter-insurgency campaigns led by local forces to targeted coalition airstrikes. But ultimately, Washington should use “all elements of national power,” as the 9/11 Commission advised, to keep terrorists on the run in those locations.

Ensuring foreign governments are equipped to fight off extremism and provide security

America has been lethally effective at taking out terrorist targets, especially from the air. But if there are not on-the-ground forces to lock in security gains, terrorists will come roaring back. This responsibility cannot be borne by the United States alone. We simply do not have the capacity to unilaterally fight a generational, global ground war. Providing security and stability is primarily the task of foreign governments and capable local forces. Without partners who can control their territory and protect their own people, power vacuums form and jihadists press the advantage. Yet today too many nations are teetering on the edge.

As noted earlier, the United States must focus on strengthening local forces so that we do not have to send our own. However, we must help them do more than just take the fight to the enemy. We should make sure local military and police forces have the ability to keep extremists at bay into the future, are accountable, and promote stability. Only then can we prevent terror safe havens from emerging. We should encourage regional partners to also provide the security cooperation needed to enhance these forces, and at the same time, ensure that the U.S. military and Intelligence Community are resourced and prepared to provide counterterrorism capacity-building where we deem it a necessity for our national security.

Moreover, we must be unyielding in our efforts to hold state sponsors of terror accountable. Regimes like Iran use nation-state capabilities and resources to prop up insurgencies and brutal terrorist outfits throughout the world. The president must make clear to state sponsors that there will be consequences for any nation that supports or harbors terrorists, and the U.S. government must take decisive action to enforce that policy and deter like-minded regimes from doing the same.

Promoting economic development, good governance, and peaceful resolutions to conflict

In the long run, political and economic solutions are the key to creating stability. Terrorists thrive on lawlessness, and they exploit political and religious grievances. Accordingly, once extremist groups are defeated on the ground, foreign governments face the crucial and abiding task of keeping them at bay by establishing lasting security, building inclusive political systems, and growing their economies to create jobs and opportunity. America should assist such efforts when it is in our interests, recognizing that the stability of foreign countries is critical to the security of our own.

We should not strike out in search of nations to build, but we also should not permit fragile countries to fall into terrorists' hands. Instead, the United States should make strategic investments in at-risk countries and encourage capable and accountable governments that respect the rule of law. Moreover, our foreign assistance should be tied to metrics and conditioned on demonstrable progress. But we cannot pretend aid is the answer. In the long run, trade is a better tool for fueling development, therefore we should help facilitate access to open markets.

Diplomatically, we should use our influence to hold foreign governments accountable. Regimes that oppress their people and limit political participation create the conditions for extremist movements to flourish. The president should empower the State Department to publicly and privately urge closed societies to open up gradually and to promote human dignity. Nations should be made aware that failure to do so will harm relations with the United States over time.

Finally, we need to seek diplomatic solutions to civil wars and long-running disputes that fuel extremism. Our track record on this account has been poor in recent years. We have failed to deter other powers from intervening in foreign conflicts and exacerbating political and humanitarian crises. The United States has historically been seen as a powerful broker between nations, and we should keep that reputation by seeking to resolve international conflicts that are exploited by terrorist groups. However, we should always recognize that our best point of leverage is not our words but our strength, which should always be maintained in order to secure peaceful settlements.

WIN THE BATTLE OF IDEAS

The war against Islamist terror is—fundamentally—an ideological struggle, and to prevail we must undermine the movement's insidious worldview, much as we did against communism and fascism. But there are limitations to this approach in the near term. We can only do so much to push back against the terrorists' narrative. The ultimate counter-messaging strategy is to make the enemy's cause look like a losing one by rolling back its gains, dismantling its networks, and defeating it. Nevertheless, in the long term we must displace the totalitarian ideology of extremists with its only antithesis: freedom and human dignity.

Leading with purpose and moral clarity

To win the battle of ideas, we must start by actually waging one. The ideological front of our war effort is rudderless. Washington has failed to outline and defend the broader purpose of our war against Islamist terror, and Americans have grown frustrated by the lack of leadership. It is the job of the commander-in-chief to maintain public support for armed conflicts and to explain to the country why they must be waged, where we stand, and how we will win. That means leveling with the American people about what is at stake and what it will cost to prevail.

Above all, our leaders in Washington must call the threat what it is. We have learned through hard experience that to defeat an enemy, you must define it. The 9/11 Commission put it best, writing, “[T]he enemy is not just ‘terrorism,’ some generic evil. This vagueness blurs the strategy. The catastrophic threat at this moment in history is more specific. It is the threat posed by Islamist terrorism...” Yet parts of our government have become blind to the root of this evil due to a lack of moral clarity at the top. This is not mere semantics. Instead, identifying the threat is a strategic and military imperative.

We must make it clear who the enemy is: Islamist terrorists. These radicals have perverted a major religion into a hateful worldview, and while their beliefs are not shared by most Muslims, their motivations must be understood. Knowing the opponent’s goals and drives allows us to anticipate its actions and recognize its weaknesses. Sadly, the lack of emphasis on this point has left us without a coherent plan to go after the enemy’s center of gravity—its ideology.

With the nature of the enemy defined, we can begin to plan the large, long-term movements needed to assure its demise. The Cold War is instructive. While there was no straight path to defeating communism, understanding its premises allowed the West to find the movement’s antagonists—and empower them. We must do the same. America and its allies should back those who stand against Islamist terror, especially tolerant Muslims, our natural allies in the fight. Right now, extremists are succeeding in making this appear to be a polarizing struggle between Islam and the West, but with moral clarity we can show this dichotomy is a false one.

Countering terrorist propaganda overseas

Terror has gone viral, and just as we cannot cede the physical battlefield, we must not allow terrorists to use the digital battle space to radicalize new foot soldiers. The United States and its allies should counter-message and disrupt these recruiting appeals with the

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overall goal of driving a wedge between terrorists and their targets, especially members of the Muslim faith whom they seek to corrupt. The same approach proposed domestically (described earlier in *Stop Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization at Home*) must be encouraged abroad: empowering credible voices. This includes promoting engagement by former extremists, friends and family, victims of terror, moderate religious figures, and others.

Government's public role must be limited. Potential extremists are likely to ignore messages that are clearly government-sponsored, which is why the United States and its allies should instead play an enabling role. But that does not mean there is no room for public action. America and its coalition partners should continue to use information recovered on the battlefield to undercut terrorist propaganda, including content that reveals the harsh reality of life under jihadist rule, evidence of extremist losses, communications that contradict terrorists' official line, and more. Additionally, the United States should recalibrate overt outreach efforts to better assist in the fight, including the State Department's public diplomacy activities, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

The U.S. government should also do more to enlist our foreign partners in the battle of ideas. Many are on the frontlines and face a greater threat from domestic radicalization than the United States. We should work with them to coordinate counter-messaging activities and to share proven outreach methods that are having an impact on the ground. We should likewise assist less-capable countries by helping them build a counter-radicalization capacity. It is also imperative that we put pressure on foreign governments who further the spread of extremist ideology and send a strong signal that good relations with the United States will be contingent on a regime's efforts to counter the proliferation of radical Islamism.

But in the end, we cannot confront 21st century challenges with 20th century tools and 19th century government bureaucracies. We need private-sector innovation to go after terrorist propaganda and amplify its alternatives. As noted in an earlier section, quick take-downs of extremist content are important. Without compromising free speech, we should continually press companies to keep their platforms from becoming megaphones for terrorists. Silicon Valley, for instance, can be a partner in helping reach broader audiences with counter-messaging campaigns. However, tech companies must be transparent about their efforts and forward leaning in removing terrorist content; if they are not, their inaction should be highlighted publicly.

Promoting liberty and human dignity as the alternative to repression and terror

While force is necessary to turn the tide, the war against Islamist terror will not be won with bullets and bombs alone. It also requires the force of our ideas. The motive power of Islamist terror is a worldview based on oppression, and we have learned that closed societies are incubators for this kind of hate. In short, political alienation gives rise to extremism. So in

the long run, the United States should work toward a world without repressive regimes by continuing its historic foreign policy tradition of promoting liberty and human dignity as the antidote to tyranny and terror.

At the same time, we must be realistic about limitations in the ideological fight. We cannot impose our ideas upon the unwilling. Political liberty is the work of generations and requires gradual reform, rule of law, economic development, and—most importantly—indigenous popular support. However, over time we can tip the balance of power in world affairs in favor of democratic ideals through tools like aid, trade, and diplomacy. The United States must work with foreign governments to steadily open closed societies and should use its influence to encourage human dignity and good governance, while guarding against political instability.

III. Conclusion

With terror sweeping the globe, the eyes of the world are upon us. The question for Americans is this: will we go the route of half-measures and retrenchment, or will we lean forward into a fight that can only be won with our leadership? It will be no easy task. We cannot be satisfied with short-term successes and temporary safety because if we lose our vigilance we will be talking about a struggle that lasts more than a few generations.

In the end, the United States is called upon to take action—with our allies if we can, but alone if we must—and with the protection of our homeland as the highest priority. Our finest hours as a people have been marked by strong showings of unity in defense of freedom and in defiance of those who seek to take it away. So today we must send a clear message to our terrorist enemies: you may have fired the first shot in this long war, but in keeping with the resolve of a great nation, America will fire the last.